

IS LISTENING THE ANSWER?

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Development of Effective Listening Skills

Listening skills are developmental in nature. Everyone associated with the learning environment, whether it be in the home, the school, or the dormitory, is in a position to influence the child's ultimate level of listening performance. The degree of influence will be highly related to the types of behavior that are encouraged. Too often we have not specified for the student how he can maximize his chances to learn, nor have we provided structured opportunities for him to develop positive listening habits. I'm referring now to learning specific study skills for listening. It has been consistently demonstrated that in adopting specific study techniques, learning effectiveness has been increased (Kranyik & Shankman, 1963; Morgan & Deese, 1969; Robinson, 1961). We need to consider very carefully how study skills and techniques generally associated with study by reading can find application in the aural learning experiences we provide.

It is my purpose to specify some approaches that can be used by the teacher and the student to increase the chances of effective listening and subsequent learning. For purposes of the discussion the term teacher refers to any individual having control over the arrangement of the listening experience.

Opportunities to Practice Listening

Consider for a few moments what the teacher can do to encourage effective listening skills. First, we need to provide a variety of taped or recorded material. The materials should reflect an informational input from a wide variety of content areas. Social studies, literature, and science should be presented as well as

special areas such as poetry and foreign languages. Reference material in the form of a dictionary and encyclopedia are currently being developed. To take advantage of the recorded materials already available you should be familiar with the catalog of materials available. The Talking Book program and Recorded Educational Aids to Learning are two available through the American Printing House for the Blind. There are many commercially available cassette recordings which focus on the development of listening skills. The Educational Developmental Laboratories has a series with primary levels especially adapted for use with visually handicapped students. There is a publication currently available and one in preparation which list other firms producing recorded instructional materials (Leach, 1970). Excellent recorded textbook materials at the high school and college level are produced through Recording for the Blind.

It is quite important that the content of the material be appropriate and meaningful to the student. For this reason the teacher must also be ready to prepare tapes for listening. The individual needs and abilities of the students should provide the structure and format for the recording. The increased availability of compressed speech tapes will provide further opportunities to emphasize listening as an effective learning medium.

Providing opportunities for listening is an integral part of the familiarization process; however, listening skill development will not be an automatic outcome. There are other things the teacher must do to complement the opportunities for practice. This brings us to the second major way we can influence the development of listening skills.

Interaction with the Message

The students must be encouraged to interact with the message. We promote such interaction when we pause in our teaching to ask questions of the class. Hopefully, some of the students will even be anticipating what the questions might be. We are all familiar with the many techniques they use when they try to anticipate questions for a test. In the final analysis the student must ask questions of the materials, so this level of student involvement is highly desirable. It's another instance of developing independence, independent study skills.

Asking questions of the material assists the student to focus on his purpose for listening and to organize the information received

around that purpose. Here are some questions the teacher can ask and encourage the students to ask about what they hear. Ask your students:

(1) What was the main idea? It's essential to identify the main ideas presented. Without this step, meaning may be vague and recall will be adversely affected. The message may use a list of facts to support a main idea and the student must learn to distinguish between the main idea and the facts that support it.

(2) What was the nature of the selection? Was it funny, sad, exciting, or perhaps controversial? The emotional involvement of the listener may certainly affect comprehension.

(3) Did parts of the selection provide a word picture? At this point it should be recalled that the teacher should exert some control over the selections being used to develop listening skills. Especially with younger blind children, some selections will be more descriptive than others and meaningfulness will be directly related to the range and variety of their prior experiences.

You may also ask, "What part of the selection provided a summary or conclusions?" If you are listening to obtain an overview or the general organization, this may be the level at which you want them to work. Ask, "Were there cue words which alerted you to important parts?" For example, the student should be quickly alerted to words and phrases such as "in conclusion," "the main idea is," or "remember." A statement may also be repeated in a slightly different way. When there is a repetition it should give the listener a clue as to its possible importance. A change in voice, intonation, or emphasis or even a pause may signal an important detail or point. These are clues which the knowledgeable listener will use to advantage.

Another question should relate to the sequence of events. The ability to sequence is an important listening skill especially for blind children. In addition to asking for recall of a sequence, you can provide informal exercises in following a sequence of directions. With practice, a series of oral directions may be increased in number and complexity to further the development of mobility skills.

A final question may ask, "What generalizations were made?" A useful hint is to encourage the students to listen for illustrations, examples, or lengthy explanations, all of which the author

may be using to develop a generalization.

These questions may be posed by you, the teacher, or by the students as they gain experience with the listening task. It's important to let the students know there will be questions and generally to expect a certain number. The format for questions should be flexible. There is a need for oral questions prior, during, and following a listening session. Written study questions can also play a part as they require students to attend for specific facts. The teacher may also monitor the learning experience of the group in other ways. For example, you can use non-verbal responses to evaluate the students' progress. Have the students raise their hands at appropriate times. When working with a small group you may direct them to "raise your hand when you hear a main idea" or "raise your hand when you hear a summary statement or a clue word." This approach will allow you to follow-up on inaccuracies or misinterpretations which may be evident. It will certainly increase attending behavior which is so important for listening effectiveness. Mention should be made of the teacher's attitude toward listening and aural learning. Expect your students to listen. Get into the habit of giving directions only once. It is realistic to expect that with practice our students will be ready and able to listen the first time with higher degrees of accuracy.

In discussing the questions that should be asked of the students, reference has been made to the importance of listening with a purpose in mind. Once the student recognizes the purpose for listening he can select the type of questions to ask and assume some responsibility for how he listens, whether distributing the listening over time or re-listening more than once. If the purpose for listening is to gain information he may listen for main ideas or summary statements. He can generalize from the information given and compare statements with his own past experiences. His questions may focus on the what, where, or when type. For general information probably one listening will be sufficient.

If the purpose for listening is to attain a high level of comprehension, he must make an interpretation of what he hears and his questions will be of the why and how type. It is a good approach to have the student put the message into his own words. You may want to initiate this process by asking the student, "What do you think about the message content?" The ease with which he is able to organize the material will largely determine whether re-listening is necessary.

Independent Listening Behavior

There is a third way in which you can influence aural learning, but it is perhaps the most difficult of all. The student must assume responsibility for active listening. You are in the ideal position to assist the student to reach this goal.

(1) The student must become aware of the message format. If he is listening to a textbook he needs to know if it has an introduction or preface section, if it has a summary, study questions, or topic headings. He should want to know if italicized words are defined in the text or if there is a glossary included. In addition to knowing the format, it is especially critical that he know how these parts may be used to full advantage. Introductory segments, study questions, and topic headings are all useful in obtaining an overview and structuring the content for organization. Perhaps it goes without saying that when the meaning of key words is unknown, listening will not be effective. In the event some of these parts are not included, special arrangements may be made to tape a list of topic headings or to write out the table of contents. Techniques to develop an adequate vocabulary should be encouraged. New words may be defined based on the context of the message, but further use of a dictionary is highly recommended along with the general development of spelling skills. Graphics in recorded form present many problems for the listener and whenever possible a written interpretation should be provided.

(2) The student must use recording devices with ease. Complete familiarity with the equipment is essential. There are many individuals with their own personal systems for the retrieval of recorded notes and information. Time limitations do not permit a discussion of these approaches, but the problems of retrieval have been recognized. A system is needed for indexing tapes, both as to the kind and placement of audible signals. Labeling and storage for cassettes may not be as pressing a problem but some system is required.

(3) At the present time many students are using the variable speed capability with good effect. In the near future when compressed speech capabilities are more readily available, it will become even easier to skim or scan the material.

(4) A frame of reference may also be obtained when using a personal reader. Let the reader know the types of information you are interested in obtaining. In keeping with this approach, it is

imperative that the student know the types of information that will be most useful to him.

Listing the topic headings, usually represented in bold face type, quite often provides a basic outline for organizing the material and taking notes.

At this point let me outline what I feel are the basic steps for active listening. The student should be alert to the message. First, the listener should anticipate the message, by this I mean to obtain a frame of reference or the sequence of ideas that will be developed.

Second, the student should listen, listen with a purpose in mind--listening for general or specific facts, for general comprehension and understanding.

Third, the listener should evaluate the message in terms of this purpose. He should make an interpretation and generalize to information already available to him.

Fourth, there should be provision for review. It seems highly probable that he will take notes which will represent his organization. Note-taking is highly desirable since it increases attentiveness, prevents side-tracking, and acts to promote further review and ultimate understanding. The final step is to test oneself informally in preparation for a formal test that should always be expected.

An attempt has been made to offer several specific suggestions regarding the teacher's role in facilitating the development of listening skills. For purposes of review they were:

- (1) To provide a variety of opportunities for listening.
- (2) To ask questions of the material and encourage the students to ask questions.
- (3) To specify the purposes for listening, to provide techniques which will alert the student to clues in the message.
- (4) To provide suggestions for using recordings more effectively, procedures for retrieval of information, and complementary note-taking skills.

In summary let me say listening is just one method visually handicapped students have of gaining information. Our major concern should be how that information is used in the learning situation. If you are asked, "Is listening the answer?" consider how listening can be used to develop independent study skills and answer in the affirmative.

References

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AN AURAL STUDY SYSTEM DESIGNED FOR THE VISUALLY HANDICAPPED

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The Aural Study System designed and built at the American Printing House for the Blind (APH) did not just evolve, but rather was the product of several years of systematic study into the processes and procedures involved in aural learning by the blind. The impetus for such research was the oft noted slow reading rates for those who read by braille. Information on these has been concisely summarized by Nolan and Kederis (1969) where it is abundantly apparent that braille, at best, is a poor means of communication.

At the beginning of the sixth decade of this century, personnel in APH's Department of Educational Research became concerned over the slow reading rates of the blind and became interested in the academic utilization of listening as a possible means of alleviating the problem. Search of the literature revealed that, at that time, only one study (Lowenfeld, 1945) was reported where learning through reading and listening had been compared for a blind population. Results of this study showed listening to be the superior mode of communication under a number of circumstances and the faster mode under all circumstances.

The first listening study conducted by APH was done in collaboration with the University of Louisville (Bixler, Foulke, Amster & Nolan, 1961) and concerned comprehension of rapid speech by the blind. Results indicated that, within limits, this approach would be feasible. However, at this point it became evident that, because of the dearth of information concerning aural learning by the blind, the scope of the research effort needed to be extended beyond mere use of compressed or speeded speech.

Shortly thereafter, APH conducted a pilot study (Nolan, 1963) of the relative learning achieved through reading and listening by